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ABSTRACT

This study followed up earlier research on the merits of using online message boards in education students' field experiences. It assessed data from the second year of student teachers' online activities. Message boards were made available to students across the college's education programs via an online private Web community. The first year of data revealed considerable potential merit of such online activities. The current qualitative/quantitative case study used a pretest/posttest component to further examine the merit of practicum students using message boards during field experiences. During the practicum, students were required to post weekly messages to the message board. Their postings highlighted their practicum experiences. In the pre-test, students ranked their expertise in using online message boards and their perception of the merit and worth of this effort. They then wrote about what they expected to learn from posting weekly online reflections and from reading other participants' weekly online reflections. A posttest was conducted at the end of the semester. Results revealed gains in students' self-reported expertise in using the message boards. There was a qualitative/quantitative discrepancy regarding the merits of using online message boards for communication. (SM)

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A CASE STUDY EXAMINING THE MERIT OF USING INTERNET MESSAGE BOARDS DURING PRACTICUM EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The study by the Investigator regarding the merit of using online Message Boards in practicum experiences is in its second year. First year results provided data that seemed to indicate that extending conversations among practicum students beyond real-time seminars was beneficial to the students involved. Students who had not yet experienced practicum also benefited as a result of reading the Message Boards. The practicum traditionally included twelve on-campus seminars followed by twelve-week placements and three subsequent seminars. The use of Message Boards was introduced in the 2000-2001 academic year. Students post weekly reflections of their practicum experiences in message threads created by the Investigator. Weekly postings by the students reveal the ups and downs of the field experiences. A pretest/posttest survey was administered during the Spring Semester of academic year 2001-2002 to collect further data regarding participant expertise in using Message Boards and the merit of Message Board usage in practicum field experiences. Results of year two of the study are reported and plans for year three of the study are shared.

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Introduction

As a result of a first-year study, examining the merit of using online Message Boards in field experiences, this follow-up study is driven by assessment and data used and collected in the second year of studying online activities of education students in practicum placements.

The first year of examining practicum students' usage of online Message Boards provided data that seemed to indicate extending conversations among the students beyond the real-time seminars was beneficial. Students shared weekly reflections of their particular field placements with their cohorts online. Students sometimes replied to other participants' postings and dialogue beyond real-time meetings resulted. A conversation about the field experiences emerged that would otherwise not have existed.

The Message Boards were made available to students across the college's education programs through an online private web community. Students who had not yet had practicum experiences were able to read about life in the educational practicum trenches through the postings of their counterparts. It seemed apparent that the sharing of field experience reflections across the education programs sparked conversations among education students that otherwise would not have occurred.

With the first year of data revealing considerable potential merit of such online activities, the Investigator determined that a more formal assessment should be constructed in the second year of the study to yield additional information. A qualitative/quantitative case study utilizing a pretest/posttest component was designed to

provide additional data regarding the merit of practicum students using message boards during their field experiences.

The Practicum

The practicum studied consists of 15 on-campus seminars followed by 12 weeks of placements in area schools for two hours daily. During the first three and one-half weeks of the semester, the Instructor and practicum students engage themselves in 12 on-campus seminars from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. to contemplate such matters as classroom management, reflective practice, discipline plans, lesson plans, unit plans, etc. Students write daily reflections of the seminar experience. Beyond the initial 12 seminars, practicum students are placed in local schools. Multi-Age Art and Music students experience two six-week placements while secondary education students are placed in one 12 week setting.

Students write daily reflections about the placement experience(s) to add to their subsequent INTASC portfolios. College Supervisors (CS's) typically observe the practicum students twice during the practicum experience, providing a midterm and final evaluation of their performance. The Cooperating Teachers (CT's) also provide midterm and final evaluations. Practicum students return to on-campus seminars on three Friday mornings during the 12 weeks of placement(s). After the first few days of placement, students return to campus and present particulars on the school district and school in which they are placed; ensuring that each student has an initial understanding of their school's context, culture and climate.

At the midpoint of the practicum, students return to campus for a seminar where they submit midterm evaluations from the CT's, share a videotape of an early practicum teaching episode and submit two journal article description and reaction papers in their subject areas. The Instructor collects the videotapes at the end of the seminar, watches the videotaped lessons and writes formative evaluations of the taped lessons. The Instructor also provides guidelines for constructing resumes and Standards-Based Units of Instruction that are subsequently submitted by the practicum students in the final on-campus seminar at the end of the 12-week placement(s).

Practicum students make arrangements to pick up their first video episodes of their teaching and the formative written evaluations soon after the mid-point seminar. During the final seminar, at the end of the 12 week placement(s), the students present a second videotaped lesson during the seminar from the same videotape containing the first taped episode. They also submit their resume, their Standards-Based unit of instruction and their emerging INTASC Portfolio containing naturally occurring artifacts resulting from the practicum experience. The Instructor again views subsequent videotaped lessons and provides a summative evaluation of the episodes.

Students make arrangements to pick up the videotapes, resumes, unit plans and INTASC portfolios during final examination week. The Instructor directs students to videotape their future, required student teaching video episodes on the same videotape so that all practicum and student teaching video episodes are on the same VHS videotape. Students are further advised to submit their constructed resumes as part of the student teacher application package and to place their unit plans in their INTASC portfolios.

Last year, online Message Boards were incorporated into the practicum course. After the initial weeks of on-campus seminars, students were assigned the task of posting weekly reflections on a Message Board. During each week of the field-placement a message thread was created by the Instructor in the Practicum Message Board. An e-mail listserv containing the e-mail addresses of the practicum students was constructed. Each week after the message thread was added to the Message Board, the Instructor listserv e-mailed the students to alert them to the posting of the message thread to instruct them on where to find the thread and when to post their weekly reflection.

When the practicum students would open the message thread they would discover additional instructions about how to copy and paste their weekly reflection, for the practicum week, in the first discussion message of the message thread.

Weekly postings by the practicum students revealed the ups and downs of their practicum experiences. Last year, the Instructor shared several of the Message Board postings at the 2001 Mid-Western Educational Research Association Annual Meeting as evidence for considering the ongoing study of judging the merit of such online activities.

The Current Study

Prior to the Spring Semester of the 2001-2002 academic year, the Investigator designed a pretest/posttest instrument that was designed to gain both qualitative and quantitative data regarding the merit of using online Message Boards during the

practicum field experience. In the pretest, practicum students were asked to rank their expertise in using online Message Boards and to rank their perception of the merit and worth of using such online Message Boards as a process of communication while in their field experience(s).

Students were then asked to write about what they expected to learn from posting weekly online reflections during the practicum experience. They were also asked to write about what they expected to learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflections during the experience.

The study is qualitative in nature because the sample is convenient and because the intent is to present findings in a case study format. The posttest was administered in early May, 2002 at the final on-campus seminar. Results of the pretest/posttest case are published and shared herein. The Investigator shall reflect on the results of the data and design a third year study examining the merit of message board usage in practicum and field experiences.

Year Two Study Results

PRETEST

Pretest Question 1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank your expertise in using online Message Boards:

Mean= 7.43 Median= 9 Mode= 9 n= 8

Pretest Question 2

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication.

Mean= 8.87 Median= 9 Mode= 10 n= 8

Pretest Question 3

What do you expect to learn from posting weekly online reflections during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"By posting online weekly reflections, I expect that I will notice more about my teaching methods and myself that I have previously overlooked. Sometimes just writing about your experiences can help you think of solutions for some of your problems."

"I expect to gain simply by reflecting. It will be a chance to look back, critique and learn from experiences. It can be valuable as something to look back on to see growth. It will give helping advice and encouragement to those who read them."

Pretest Question 4

What do you expect to learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"I can learn what other people are going through and compare it to my own experience. I will be able to take whatever things work for them and apply them and avoid whatever doesn't work for them.

Pretest Question 4 continued:

"I will learn what other students are experiencing in the classroom, as well as what problems or positives they are facing. If a student is having a similar problem that I may be, I can call on them to help me through personal experiences. Also, it enables everyone who takes part to actively help each other with support/advice."

POSTTEST

Posttest Question 1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank your expertise in using online Message Boards:

Mean= 8 Median= 9 Mode= 9 n=8

Posttest Question 2

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication:

Mean= 8.2 Median= 9 Mode=9 n=8

Posttest Question 3

What did you learn from posting weekly online reflections during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph.)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"It helped me reflect on everything I went through over the week, thinking about things I did well or things I can do better. I got to see how my experiences compared with others."

"I learned a lot about myself and my teaching methods. Actually thinking about a reflection that my classmates were going to read helped me come up with better ideas and reflect on what I had been doing in class."

Posttest Question 4

What did you learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings during the practicum experience? (Provide a short paragraph.)

Answers that best reflected the group's answers:

"I learned about the highs and lows that each practicum student was experiencing. Comparing my experience with others was very interesting because I could see the different things each teacher was going through. This helps you sympathize and reflect about how you would handle situations that different teachers are in."

"I learned that everyone has good and bad days. Also, you can throw out a question to your peers and get well thought out answers and responses. I also learned that reflective teaching is a benefit because you can sort of talk back to yourself and to others and find ways to improve and also realize what you did well as well."

PRETEST/POSTTEST COMPARISONS

Question 1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank your expertise in using online Message Boards:

Pretest:	**Mean= 7.43**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 9**	**n= 8**
Posttest:	**Mean= 8**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 9**	**n=8**

Participants' self-ranking of their expertise in using online Message Boards mean scores increased .57 from the pretest to the posttest. The median and mode remained constant.

Question 2

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=lowest, 10=highest) rank the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication:

Pretest:	**Mean= 8.87**	**Median= 9**	**Mode= 10**	**n= 8**
Posttest:	**Mean= 8.18**	**Median= 9**	**Mode=9**	**n=8**

Participants' self-ranking of the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication decreased .69 from the pretest to the posttest. The median remained constant and the mode decreased from 10 to 9.

Question 3

Pretest: What do you expect to learn from posting weekly online reflections....?

"....Notice more about my teaching methods and myself.... Opportunity to reflect and look back..."

Posttest: What did you learn from posting weekly online reflections....?

"....It helped me reflect on everything I went through.... I learned a lot about myself and my teaching methods...."

Participants' reported expectations about what they expected to learn from posting weekly online reflections complemented what they reported they learned from posting weekly online reflections.

Question 4

Pretest: What do you expect to learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings….?

"….I can learn what other people are going through and compare it to my own experience…. I will learn what other students are experiencing in the classroom, as well as what problems or positives they are facing…."

Posttest: What did you learn from reading other participants' weekly online reflection postings….?

"….I learned about the highs and lows that each practicum student was experiencing…. I also learned that reflective teaching is a benefit…

Participants' reported expectations about what they expected to learn from reading other participants' weekly online postings complemented what they reported they learned form reading other participants' weekly online reflections.

Highlights of Year Two of the Study

Students reported a .57 mean gain in their expertise in using online Message Boards during the experience.

Students reported a .69 decrease in the mean regarding their perception of the merit and worth of using online Message Boards as a means of communication.

Students' perceptions about what they expected to learn from posting weekly online reflections complemented their perceptions about what they had learned from such postings.

Students' perceptions about what they expected to learn from reading other participants' complemented their perceptions about what they had learned from such readings.

Year Two Study Reflections

The Investigator anticipated mean score increases between the pretest and posttest regarding participant self-reported expertise in using online Message Boards and an

increase of .57 was realized. The Investigator did not expect a .69 decrease in pretest/posttest mean score regarding the merit and use of Message Boards. Were the participants unrealistic in their expectations? Were the high pretest scores unrealistic? Did the fact that the students who used the Message Boards least also reported the lowest posttest scores contribute to the decrease substantially? Additionally, the qualitative responses in pretest and posttest questions 3 and 4 were complementary and expected.

The quantitative results of a decreased mean score, regarding the merit of use of Message Boards, suggests a slight dissonance between what students expect the merit of Message Boards to be and what the merit actually is. However, the qualitative responses regarding what students expected to learn from posting and reading the postings of others were complementary across the study.

In a past study (Moffett, 1997), the Investigator discovered the importance of training and requirements of use in any program or pursuit. In year three of the study (2002-2003), the Investigator is implementing a requirement that students reply to at least two other participants' postings on a weekly basis. Since there is a discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative results regarding the merit of using online Message Boards, the Investigator will collect additional data with the new participation requirement in place.

Year one of the study (Moffett, 2001) garnered qualitative data that described the ups and downs of the practicum experience via online Message Boards. Year two of the study revealed gains in self-reported expertise regarding the use of Message Boards and produced a quantitative/qualitative discrepancy regarding the merit of use of online Message Boards as a communications tool.

Year three of the study will continue to focus on the merit of using Message Boards in practicum and field experiences and the Investigator plans to share data regarding the effects that the newly implemented requirement has on students' quantitative and qualitative perceptions of merit.

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